SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

March 21, 2011

During the summer of 2010, Vermont joined with 33 partner states to form the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). In October, SBAC was awarded a 168 million dollar Federal Race to the Top grant to support development of "next generation student assessments." This document provides responses to questions about SBAC generated at the Department's Regional Common Core meetings held in November. The information is accurate as of March 21, 2011. However, some questions from the regional meetings remain in the "parking lot" due to a lack of current and reliable information. Additional questions about SBAC may be addressed to Michael Hock (michael.hock@state.vt.us).

1. **What does SMARTER stand for?**

   SMARTER stands for **S**ummative **M**ulti-state **A**ssessment **R**esources for **T**eachers and **E**ducational **R**esearchers. SBAC is a merger of three multi-state assessment consortia that formed in response to a US Department Education announcement that they planned to target Race to the Top funds toward producing next generation assessments. The *SMARTER Consortium* was comprised of several states who were innovators in the area of Computer-Adaptive Testing. The *Balanced Consortium* formed around the work of Stanford University Professor Linda Darling-Hammond that proposed integrated assessment systems comprised of inter-related formative, interim and summative assessments. The *Mosaic Consortium* was primarily focused on professional development aimed at promoting assessment literacy and formative classroom assessments. The overall SBAC system incorporates elements contributed by all three of the original consortia.

2. **Will all grades be assessed with the Common Core standards including the high school?**

   Unless there are unanticipated changes to the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, formerly known as No Child Left Behind), the grade levels at which state assessments will be administered will not change from the current model – grades 3 through 8 and 11. There is no plan to assess students below grade 3. However, SBAC will be targeting some of its resources toward formative assessment procedures and materials, useful at all grade levels and particularly appropriate for instruction with younger students. In addition, in order to facilitate measurement of individual student growth (question 10) the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is planning to implement offering performance assessments in grades 9 and 10 as a basis for predicting scores on the grade 11 test.

3. Will the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the coming SBAC assessments mean a growth model? How will we measure student progress?

There is currently no specific requirement associated with the Common Core State Standards that requires the use of a growth model. However, the Common Core was developed around the concept of progress toward College and Career Readiness, which would make growth the logical choice for reporting student results and determining school accountability. Articulating and measuring a growth model is among the US DOE's funding priorities for the two assessment consortia. SBAC will provide a gain score for individual students as they take successive years of the assessment. Gain scores demonstrate the amount of progress or growth individual students make across years and assessments.

4. Will all students take these assessments?

Unless there are unanticipated changes to the ESEA, the requirement to include all students in accountability assessment will not change. Also, consistent with current policies, accommodations will be provided for students with special assessment needs, alternate assessments will continue to be available for students with significant cognitive deficits, and exemptions for individual student health concerns will be permitted for the very few students that may need them.

5. Will the needs of special education students be met with the new assessment? How will we accommodate their needs?

The SBAC computer-delivered assessment system offers a significant advantage. Over the past few years a variety of new technologies have been developed to provide assessment accessibility for students with special assessment needs. Nimble Tools, developed by researchers at Boston College using grant resources obtained by the NECAP states, is a great example familiar to many schools in Vermont that participated in Nimble research and field-testing. A variety of these accessibility tools – read-aloud technology, magnification, word/sentence masking, calming music, color overlays, etc. – are planned for SBAC. Accommodations similar to those available for our current assessments will also be available to the extent that they will still be needed. Overall, through our work with Nimble Tools, we have learned that many students who are typically reluctant to participate in traditional pencil and paper testing, are motivated by the computer-based format.

6. Please explain in greater detail how schools will deliver assessments by computer.

The SBAC summative assessments are being developed around new and highly innovative technology known as Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT). The CAT assessment "engine" begins by delivering a short series of moderately difficult grade level test items to the student and then, depending on the student's initial performance, delivers items that are either more or less difficult. This process continues until the student's exact level of proficiency is determined.

CAT has several advantages for Vermont schools and students. First, although there has been continuing interest in adapting at least part of NECAP for computer-based, on-line administration, we have been disadvantaged by the differing levels of capacity across schools, both in terms of numbers of computers and quality of internet service. The major issue has been test security. In order to administer a test such as NECAP securely via the internet, a school would need to have enough computers and sufficient bandwidth to give the test, at a minimum, to half the students a grade level, followed immediately by the other half with no opportunity for the students to interact in between. By current estimates, only slightly more than half of Vermont's schools meet these prerequisites.

With CAT, however, every student essentially receives a unique assessment so there is no need to test all the students at one time. Schools will be able to group and assess students in a configuration that matches their specific capacity. CAT also permits a much longer assessment window, up to 3 months, to run all the students through the assessment. This will allow Vermont to move into the next generation of computer-delivered assessments, without disadvantaging some schools because of limited bandwidth or computers-to-students ratio. The longer assessment window has the additional advantage of allowing teachers to determine when students are ready for testing.

7. **How will all the districts be able to get up to speed to deliver the assessments by the 2014-2015 school year?**

There are actually two parts to answering this question: how will we prepare districts to meet the technology requirements or CAT, and how will we prepare students to take tests in the new and unfamiliar way. First of all, as noted above, CAT is sufficiently flexible with respect to differences in schools' technology infrastructure. However, SBAC is currently working on a readiness tool that will help determine if schools can meet the minimum technology requirements for delivery to the tests. This tool should be ready in the next few months and will provide us with baseline information that will help prepare schools with limited capacity. Although the goal is to have all schools use CAT; for the first two years of implementation a pencil-and-paper alternative will also be available.

With respect to preparing students, a full array of practice tests will be available. SBAC also hopes to introduce non-secure interim assessments in the 2013-2014 school year that use CAT technology. However, schools will need to ensure that all students have some basic experience using computers for instructional purposes.

8. **Will there be any hands-on component to the new assessment?**

Yes. In addition to CAT, the SBAC assessment system will include several performance tasks at each grade level. Scores from the two types of assessments will be combined to produce the complete summative assessment score that will be used for accountability.

9. **If we now go to spring testing, when will we get results back?**

   Here is yet another advantage of CAT. As noted above, the final summative score from the SBAC assessment system will combine CAT results with results from two or three performance assessments administered at designated intervals throughout the school year. That score will be released in late spring. However, CAT technology provides a summary score almost immediately, and since teachers will be involved in the scoring of performance tasks, those results will be available very soon after the assessment is completed.

10. **Will the two assessments coming from the two different consortia be similar or will they offer two distinct results for the students they serve? If so, how will colleges interpret what the results say about a particular student?**

    The Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARRC) and SBAC are similar to the extent that both consortia were required to meet key priorities in order to qualify for Race to the Top funding. Both will focus on assessment of career and college readiness; will make use of digital technologies; and will combine formative, interim and summative assessments into an integrated system.

    However, there are many differences in how each consortium addresses those priorities. SBAC will use Computer Adaptive Testing technologies at all grade levels that are assessed. PARRC plans to use computer-*administered* tests at the upper grades, and although the actual tests will use advanced test development models and procedures, they won't look much different than the tests that are currently being administered. (One PARCC publication described the assessment they plan to develop as "MCAS quality at FCAT prices." MCAS and FCAT are the current state tests used by Massachusetts and Florida, two of PARCC's leading states). The Educational Testing Service has produced some useful graphics that summarize each consortiums overall assessment model that can be accessed here http://www.ets.org/k12/commonassessments.

    Whether or not the two consortia's assessments will be comparable is subject to considerable speculation and will depend on the leadership of the two groups getting together to negotiate strategies and procedures. One strategy, for example, would be to have each test include common linking items that could be used to equate the results (i.e., a score of x on PARCC is equivalent to a score of *y* on SBAC). The two consortia might also build their tests using a uniform set of assessment targets derived from the Common Core State Standards. To date, the two consortia have not met to discuss this issue

11. **Will Common Core type concepts/items be piloted in the NECAP assessments in the next few years? Would there be a pilot assessment between the end of NECAP and the implementation of the Common Core?**

    There is no plan to align NECAP to the Common Core State Standards. Through its final administration in fall 2013, NECAP will address our current standards and grade expectations using the original distributions of emphasis for each content area. However, there is a plan to code NECAP items to the CCSS to provide transitional information. This will not change the basic structure or focus of the test in any way. With respect to SBAC, all items will be pilot tested but not in conjunction with the administration of NECAP.